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Balancing Life and Studies in a Classroom Without Walls: Graduate Students' Perspectives on Online Learning

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Technological advancements taking place in the 21st century are changing the ways in which classes are taught (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Education worldwide is reaching far beyond the four walls of classroom by offering courses online. This paper explores students' perspectives on the quality of courses offered online by one Kazakhstani University, based on the advantages and challenges 12 master's degree students faced while studying some courses online during two academic years of their enrollment. According to the results of this study, participants highlighted the flexibility of online education in pursuing their academic endeavors concurrently with other responsibilities as the main advantage. However, students were challenged in managing their time due to overlapping dates for submitting the tasks completed for online courses. Since the findings of the study have limited generalizability due to small size of population, several recommendations will be made for the future research.

Keywords: master's degree students, online education, advantages and challenges.

Introduction

With the development of technology and the exponential increase in the number of students enrolling in online courses, higher educational institutions (HEIs) are shifting their approaches by offering their programs online as an alternative format of delivery (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Dewhurst, Macleod, and Norris (2000) define e-learning as an umbrella term that includes computer with access to internet to make learning available from any distance and at any time. Benefits that students gain from online education include opportunities for planning study time on their own, maintaining traditional learning environment due to face-to-face communication with teachers and peers, improving technical skills, and getting access due to lower cost and online instruction (Bartley, & Golek, 2004; Nesler, Hanner, Melburg, & McGowan, 2001; Rose & Blomeyer, 2007). In line with the benefits of online education there exist challenges that impact the overall effectiveness of courses offered online. They include difficulties in completing collaborative assignments (Davidson, 2015; Graham & Misanchuk, 2004), challenges due to the disregard of student learning styles (Sywelem, Al-Harbi, Fathema, & Witte, 2012), and low level of technical skills (Li & Irby, 2008).

Therefore, understanding and exploring the ways in which the quality of online learning courses can be ensured is of great importance. HEIs could conduct investigations pertaining to the quality and effectiveness of student's experience of the online learning programs; the results of the students could also be considered in this measurement. While perspectives of lecturers and administrators are helpful in identifying the effectiveness of online courses, this research focuses on the students' perspectives as the central idea of education is to serve their needs. Students' perspectives regarding online learning are of great importance, since they are on the receiving end of the whole educational process. These students are the ones who see the benefits and are challenged with the disadvantages existing in online learning environments.

Online learning environments will not totally replace the traditional brick and mortar classrooms. However, this format of learning could become a convenient alternative for both stakeholders: educational organizations and students. According to Bartley and Golek (2004), online learning offers convenience in the enrolment process throughout any year, offers greater affordability than the brick and mortar option, and brings with it the flexibility for students to carry out work and family responsibilities. However, the quality of online programs offered by institutions is still under question. Therefore, the evaluation of these programs is of crucial importance. To conduct a proper evaluation of online programs, the designing of effective mechanisms is required. A proper mechanism for evaluation of online programs will inform and guide instructors on whether the quality of online programs meets the needs of their students.

To evaluate the effectiveness of courses that are offered in class and virtually, questionnaires are sent to students using online and in class learning. However, numeric statistics are not enough in identifying students' viewpoint on the effectiveness of online learning. Therefore, the results of these surveys could be clarified and expanded by including interviews as a form of evaluation of the course. The research methodology employed in this study emphasizes the importance of conducting a qualitative study with the use of interviews that consist of questions which illuminate the advantages and challenges that students overcome in a virtual learning environment. Recommendations for adjustments to online courses will be made following an analysis of the results of the interviews; these measures will provide quality control on an ongoing basis.

The purpose of this study is to gain insights into Kazakhstani master's degree students' perspectives on online education by exploring the advantages and challenges they face in distance learning. The specific focus will be on master's degree students who have had experience in online education and are enrolled currently in three online courses offered by one Kazakhstani university. By gleaning a greater understanding of students' perspectives on advantages and challenges of online learning environment, this study can identify the extent to which the distance education practiced by one university in Kazakhstan is effective and provides insights on how to improve distance learning. This will lead to a better understanding how to research and offer quality online programs for graduate students.

Literature Review

The issue of online education is of great importance for all educational stakeholders, from students who take online learning courses, to global communities who seek to increase equitable access to quality education for those who cannot gain access to conventional classroom settings due to several reasons (O'Donoghue, 2014; Raymond, 2000). Individual institutions are more concerned in expanding enrolment; increasing incomes; enhancing institutional reputation and facilitating their curricula (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Setzer & Lewis, 2005). On the other hand, students are more concerned about the efficacy of online courses reflected through its advantages over the face-to-face instruction and challenges that it brings to effective teaching and learning (Swan et al., 2000). Although the perspectives on the advantages and challenges of online learning environments can vary depending on the stakeholders, this literature review specifically examines the students' perspective. Therefore, the articles included in this literature review are limited to those articles that mostly scrutinize the effectiveness of online learning environment based on the students' perspectives.

The definition of online learning

This question is of great importance since online education, as a new and growing field, can have various connotations or inconsistent definitions. Most studies on online education are focused on its characteristics, for example, being computer-assisted, technology mediated, and internet connected (Carliner, 2004; Conrad, 2006). However, Hiltz and Turoff (2005) regard online learning not only from the angle of accessibility of online learning, but also opportunities to create varied types of interactions, from scheduling to communication.

In this research we regard online education as one of the terms included in a blanket term of "e-learning" based on the definition given by Dewhurst, Macleod, and Norris (2000). The main focus in identifying students' perceptions on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning will be on the "characteristics of accessibility" as mentioned by Carliner (2004) and Conrad (2006) and "opportunities for interaction" as identified by Hiltz and Turoff (2005). The students who are included in the focus group of this study are mainly using distance learning to complete their studies while continuing to work.

Advantages and challenges of online learning from students' perspectives

There are not many studies focusing on the experiences of post graduate students using e-learning to continue their higher education. For instance, one of the recent studies by Bichsel (2013), discussing the benefits that online education brings students, mentions increased flexibility both in course delivery and resources. Bichsel (2013) defines them as crucial by stating, "When courses are offered online, students can often access lectures and other course material on their own

schedule” (p. 10). Maynes (2014) also considers that online education is convenient in allowing students to pursue other responsibilities like job or family. Similar to Maynes’s (2014) conclusion, Sit, Chung, Chow, and Wong (2005) regard flexibility in the resources and convenience of online courses in managing interaction time and physical environment as the most important benefit students take from online learning. Bichsel (2013) also mentions other benefits that students can derive from online learning: improved pedagogy and rejuvenated teaching; enhanced learning experience and improved time to receive a degree. In the same vein, Maynes (2014) states that in her study, instructors effectively engaged in online learning by setting clear expectations and providing clear feedback; participants felt comfortable with the technology and found it moderately easy to interact with other peers online. According to the study by Kirtman (2009), online learning saves times spent for travelling, gives more responsibility for one’s own learning, and allows students to learn at their own pace.

Despite the benefits mentioned above, the challenges still exist. For instance, according to Li and Irby (2008), the level of technical skills can impact on the way how students accomplish their tasks. For that reason, Maynes (2014) also highlighted the students’ perception of the importance of developing technological skills and receiving pedagogical guidance from online instructors on adapting face-to-face learning experiences to an online environment before they start online courses. In contrast to this view, Kirtman (2009) stresses that the challenges of the online learning environment are more connected to having less interaction with other peers, as the majority of students in that study reported feeling that they have fewer opportunities for small and large group interactions in online classes, which led to an improvement of students independent learning skills and a decrease of engagement skills in social interaction. Likewise, Sit et al. (2005) examined online education for nurses in Hong-Kong, reporting that this low level of human interaction in such classes is the main factor decreasing its effectiveness. The nurses found online courses less motivating due to the feelings of loneliness and isolation from social interaction.

To sum up, online learning is one of the growing areas in education which will be further developed and improved by conducting additional research. The focus of this study of effectiveness of online learning based on students’ perceptions of gained advantages and challenges pointed out issues that could be developed or addressed in future studies on online education. There are number of studies dedicated to the topic of e-learning in Kazakhstan (Kerimbayev, 2012; Kerimbayev, Akramova, and Suleimenova, 2013; Kirillova, 2005), however, few studies are done on e-learning trends in higher educational institutions (HEIs) (Dalayeva, 2012; Kenzhebeyev & Dalayeva, 2014). The works mentioned do not reveal advantages or disadvantages of online learning at this current stage. They mainly describe what online learning is and factors influencing its development. Moreover, none of the studies above make implications for further development of online education in HEIs taking into consideration stakeholders’ viewpoint. Therefore, this study is one of the first of this kind in Kazakhstan and the aim of the study to improve the efficacy of this new format for study in HEIs of Kazakhstan.

Research Methodology

To identify master’s degree students’ perspectives on advantages and challenges of online learning at one university in Kazakhstan, this study employed a qualitative approach. There are several rationales for this choice. Firstly, this study views students’ perspectives as the central phenomenon requiring exploration and understanding (Creswell, 2014). Considering the nature of this central phenomenon, we followed the recommendation by Strauss and Corbin (1998) to use qualitative methods “to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional methods” (p. 11). Secondly, this research follows Bogdan and Biklen’s (2007) emphasis that qualitative research is aimed at better understanding of participants’ perceptions rather than generalization of the study results.

The sample population of this study consisted of twelve master’s degree students in the second year of their study at one university in Kazakhstan. The participants were chosen because they had experience and knowledge of the topic at hand, and thus could share their perspectives on the advantages and challenges of online learning in a more detailed way, based on their past experience and through the comparison of online courses delivered during their two-year study. This represents a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2014, p. 228), which was chosen

because of the participants' ability to provide more detailed and accurate answers to the questions being asked in this research.

The qualitative data for this study was collected using a semi-structured interview with participants, i.e., master's degree students, as this technique encourages the interviewees to freely discuss their own opinion on the issue. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher the freedom to use follow-up questions to uncover more detailed and complex information relating to the topic at hand. This format also allows the interviewer to uncover the emotions which the subject evokes in the interviewee as described by Fontana and Frey (2000). Interviews lasted from 20 to 40 minutes and took place during and after study day, depending on what is convenient for the participants. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim passages to facilitate subsequent data analysis.

For data analysis and final interpretation of the results, this study employed a six-step approach described by Creswell (2014), which involves storing and transcribing the data; exploring and coding the data; employing the steps involved in coding; identifying text segments; assigning code labels to the segments; and forming a description of the central phenomenon.

Findings and Discussion

There are a few advantages and challenges that students face taking classes online. The most significant advantages revealed by the study were the flexibility which online learning allows, and the respondents also felt that the online learning format did not significantly diminish the interactive aspect of learning. The most noteworthy disadvantage of online learning highlighted by this study was overlapping deadlines and challenges related to time management.

Students' perspectives of the advantages of online learning

As for the advantages of online learning, the advantages like flexibility and self-tailored learning over face-to-face sessions were significantly emphasized by most interviewees. Students also discussed the value of student-teacher and peer interaction created by the online course instructor.

Flexibility. Almost all of the interviewed students discussed the flexibility of online learning courses in pursuing academic endeavors concurrently with carrying out other responsibilities such as job and family. This finding supports Maynes (2014), who asserted that online courses are more convenient for master's degree students because they allow them to carry out multiple responsibilities at one and the same time.

The idea of flexibility for students did not include only the freedom in choosing the time and place to learn, but also the pace and ways comfortable for them within course deadlines. As one respondent reported:

In online courses you are given specific tasks with detailed criteria and set deadlines that you can do in your own pace, nobody [waits] for your immediate answer or you do not wait [for] others to complete their tasks as it usually happens in class. You have [the] opportunity to think, rethink and develop your work. What is more important, you are not required to sit in [a] classroom and accomplish your tasks only there.

As we see, students understand flexibility also as independence in allocating resources, managing time, and choosing the place and way to learn. Accordingly, the findings of this study emphasized the possibility to tailor their learning in the most comfortable way for them. This finding coincides with Sit et al. (2005) and Maynes (2014), who reported that the most important benefits students gain from online learning are flexibility and convenience in managing interaction time and physical environment. Kirtman (2009) further stated that in courses offered online, students take responsibility for their own learning and are not interrupted by other students' pace of learning in the group.

Interaction. According to respondents, the idea of increasing peer and student-instructor interaction is of crucial importance in the online learning environment. One respondent substantiated this viewpoint by saying that: "Establishing and maintaining social presence in online learning is of vital importance for me, since only when the instructor gives meaningful feedback, I can feel that the issues in my learning are under concern". Moreover, the majority of students considered online learning as advantageous as face-to-face learning due to the opportunities to interact with peers

and teachers created by the instructors, who gave group assignments that require collaborative decision making online, along with evaluative feedback and comments students gave each other in order to improve their written posts in an online portal. In contrast with nurses in the study by Sit et al. (2005), and with teachers in the study by Kirtman (2009), participants of this study found online learning more interactive and socially engaging.

Students' perspectives of the challenges of online learning

Despite the advantages discussed so far, the participants believe there is still room for improvement for the online learning environment at their university. The following challenges were highlighted in the data: overlapping deadlines, challenges in time-management, and difficulties in learner-learner interaction.

Overlapping deadlines and time-management. While discussing the challenges students faced in taking online courses in university in Kazakhstan, most of them referred to the issue of overlapping deadlines and time-management. One respondent explained thoroughly the consequences of overlapping deadlines by saying that: "When several instructors put close deadlines, when I have to submit at the same day or one after another, the quality of assignments suffers, and since I have other commitments, those are not the only things that suffer..." One respondent even came up with the recommendation for overcoming the challenge of time management in online learning environment by advising the university to organize a course on time management and saying that:

Since the walls of online learning class are unseen, it is challenging to balance the real and virtual life. Therefore, it would be better for us to be instructed or taught on how to manage the time and then only to practice it.

Learner- learner interaction. This study has also found that there is a varied level of students' satisfaction with the learner-learner interaction created by online course instructors. Despite some respondents who were quite happy with the conditions created for learner-learner interaction in online learning environment, a number of students suggested its further improvement. Students recommended including more group assignments, pair work, collaborative decision-making projects, among others.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice and Further Study

In summary, this overview of students' perspectives on advantages and challenges of online education has sought to reveal several things that should be improved. In particular, the findings of this research indicated several implications for course instructors and administration team of the university. Overall, it is recommended for course instructors and administration team of the university to equip their students with time management skills. Also, course facilitators should discuss respective deadlines to avoid overlapping of deadlines, as well as arrange more opportunities for social interaction while designing tasks and activities for online courses.

However, the ways in which online education can be improved can be undertaken based on the practice of each school, since the recommendations are only based on the perspectives of students of one cohort of students, in one department of the school, who probably did not know about the past experience of the school. This small sample population is most significant limitation of this study. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized to all cohorts of the university, let alone to students of other universities.

The sample group participates in distance learning in a specific model of online learning which includes various modalities of interactivity the study is limited in its applicability to the multiplicity of online learning experiences. Moreover, this study uses single research instrument, an interview, to identify students' perceptions on the advantages and challenges of learning online. In order to get a more holistic picture, it is planned to employ mixed research design with the use of interview and survey results from focus groups.

In order to address these limitations, some recommendations for future research in the area of online education are made based on these findings. First of all, Kazakhstani master's degree students' perspectives on advantages and challenges of online education need to be researched in greater depth. Thus, to generalize the findings future studies should seek to involve larger sample population with regard to age, experience, gender and technical knowledge. Moreover, longitudinal qualitative study should be conducted representing the perspectives of students from

various cohorts of university and progress in the improvement in the system of online education. To receive a more complete and synergistic results it is recommended to employ mixed method approach by integrating qualitative data with quantitative data received from surveys.

As 21st century skills development and lifelong improvement of human capital are important goals for organizations and government alike, online learning can bring a lot of opportunities for professional development for those who carry out job, family and work responsibilities concurrently. Similarly, this research has indicated that online learning offers multiple opportunities for increasing the number of postgraduate students in Kazakhstan and thus provide equal access to high quality further learning. Therefore, universities in Kazakhstan should seek the ways in which they can improve the services of online education and continue its further development.

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